

FCS and Developmental Curriculum

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“The first years of school can be a major predictor of success or failure in later life,” according to a nineteen-year study conducted at John Hopkins University. This is one of the reasons that FCS employs a developmental approach to education.

A developmental approach to early childhood education views the child moving through intellectual and physiological stages. Children at this age vary greatly in their perceptual and auditory abilities, their gross and fine motor coordination and their language development. It is necessary to develop each child’s individual skills through concrete experiences. The curriculum is framed on what is known about the spiritual, physical, social and intellectual growth of children.

Developmental educators believe the following:

First, age is the least effective indicator of school readiness. Just because a child turns five does not necessarily mean he is developmentally ready for Kindergarten. Each child develops on his own time clock. As children learn to speak and walk at different ages, children are ready to learn and to read at different ages. No one would ever expect a child to walk just because he is eleven months old and his brother walked at nine months. So why expect all five-year olds to be ready for Kindergarten at the same time? A child who is developmentally too young will become frustrated and his self-confidence will begin to erode. We believe it is important that a child’s first experience in school is a success rather than a failure, since success in the classroom is critical to a child’s self-esteem. Therefore, it is necessary to screen all children to determine their readiness level. We use the Developmental Readiness Scale, (DRS), to determine readiness. The DRS tests a child’s concept of numbers, his concept of himself and others, and his gross and fine motor development and helps us determine a child’s readiness for our curriculum.

Secondly, developmental educators believe children **should not** be expected to be reading by the end of Kindergarten. Some children who are developmentally ready will begin to read on their own in Kindergarten. But most will not. In reference to public pressures that lead to an early start of reading instruction, the NACE states, “No matter how well-intentioned such pressures may be they are less likely to reduce reading failure than they are to produce large numbers of confused, failure-oriented children at an early age.” The country with the lowest recorded percentage of reading learning disabilities is Sweden. They do not begin formal teaching of reading until the age of seven and yet they have the highest literacy rate in the world. The point is that **early is not necessarily better.**

Joanne Yarkin, in her book, Let’s Go Slow on Acceleration, states, “Children forced into a program of book and pencil-and-paper tasks without a pre-academic skills foundation are prone to develop learning disabilities in one or more academic areas.” We do a minimal amount of pencil and paper tasks in Pre-K and Kindergarten. Our focus is on visual and auditory perceptual development, fine motor and gross skills, and listening skills and oral language development. Students are grouped according to their readiness levels and are actively involved in

manipulating concrete objects, observing, experimenting, explaining ideas, and predicting outcomes. Our goal is to ensure a pre-academic skill foundation to build on.

A third belief of developmental educators is that learning should be fun and active. Thus children will be excited about learning. We encourage teachers to employ a variety of teaching methods including experiments, learning games, projects, and investigations. In grades pre-K through first grade, we avoid over-emphasis on rote memorization and too much paperwork. The ability to memorize is not an indicator of true understanding of a concept. We would rather a student learn about and test the theory of displacement through experiments rather than by simply memorizing the definition for a written test. In Mathematics, students do more than memorize mathematical facts in order to find the answers to problems. Instead, our students in the elementary grades use beads and beans, macaroni shells and Unifix cubes to show how a problem should be worked. This hands-on type of instruction in mathematics will give students a visual picture of mathematical concepts.

Since the right curriculum is essential to developmental education, we use some of the best hands-on curriculum available in the grades first through sixth. Our developmental phonics program begins formal reading instruction in first grade.

In the younger grades our science program stresses the processes of science such as investigating, experimenting, theorizing, predicting outcomes and revising theories. We are teaching our students to become young scientists employing these processes rather than just memorizing terminology. We want to instill a curiosity of science rather than the normal dread students have of science because it means memorizing and spelling words that have no meaning. In social studies, our classrooms become an Indian Village or foreign countries as students participate in projects pertaining to the unit they are studying. We take frequent field trips to visit places we are studying such as Tryon Palace, Old Salem, and the Indian Mounds.

Now turning our attention to Jr/Sr. High, we employ developmental principles based upon what is known about the needs of adolescents, the need for socialization and the need for active learning to keep them interested. Learning must be meaningful. Here again, we want involved learners and use projects, experiments, and motivating learning tools. Social Studies becomes an occasion for a Medieval Faire or International Day. Science allows for investigations and experiments in addition to the necessary book knowledge. In Mathematics, instead of just having students complete work problems out of the book to find ratios, learning would become meaningful by having them bring in their baseball cards and finding the batting averages of their baseball heroes. With this, learning has meaning and relevance. In other words, it is important to keep the students actively involved in the learning process.

Of course, there are academic goals we push students to achieve. We want each student to reach their full academic potential so we offer a challenging academic program. Since most of our students are college bound, we believe it is important to instill good study habits and create an atmosphere of learning that fosters student success. Learning does not and should not come easily, but with effort and hard work. Our teachers are committed to helping each student in their academic preparation.

Finally, how does this developmental approach to learning measure up on Achievement tests? Studies indicate that students in a developmental program will generally score lower on achievement tests up through the second grade. This is because in Pre-K through 2nd grades, we are not pushing the acquisition of facts but rather laying a foundation for later learning. These same studies show students in a developmental program begin to score higher on achievement tests beginning in third grades all the way through high school. This is because with a strong academic foundation students have learned problem-solving techniques and higher order thinking skills.

At FCS our overall school average on the Stanford Achievement Test has consistently been in the 80th percentile. Our seniors have consistently scored above national levels on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Twelve of our graduates have been recognized by the National Merit Foundation. Of these 12 six attended FCS since pre-K. The National Merit Foundation recognizes the top 2% of seniors from across the nation who have the highest SAT scores. We have found the developmental approach is effective for us at FCS in developing good students with strong academic skills.